

Imagined Slights

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Imagined Slights

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Summary

He wasn't ever certain when he'd first realized that he was always given his slice of apple second, but he did know that he'd frowned, brows knitted together as he stared down at his slice to keep from looking at Thor. It was a silly thing to care about, and likely untrue in any case. A thing to dismiss, for it was, perhaps, just circumstance; they only spent afternoons together like this once a month, and so perhaps he'd forgotten the times when he'd been given his half first.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

When Loki was so young that he was barely as tall as Odin's knee, he hadn't noticed. The afternoons he spent with his father and Thor in their mother's garden were warm and loving, the memories still precious despite how twisted with bitterness they had become.

Their mother would read aloud to them, pausing whenever a man spoke in the story so that she could show the page to their father and he could provide a warrior's voice. Loki and Thor would chase after each other across the paths and in the grass, their mother sighing and their father laughing as their fine clothes got covered with dirt. On the days when it rained they sat on the covered terrace, a rare moment when Thor found himself obliged to play quiet games of string sitting across from Loki on the floor while they listened.

Every time their father would bring with him three apples, a favoured fruit of his that he shared

with his family. One he would give to his wife, the other he would keep for himself, and the last he would split for his sons, one half each.

And then, slowly, Loki had grown, as children are wont to do.

He wasn't ever certain when he'd first realized that he was always given his slice of apple second, but he did know that he'd frowned, brows knitted together as he stared down at his slice to keep from looking at Thor. It was a silly thing to care about, and likely untrue in any case. A thing to dismiss, for it was, perhaps, just circumstance; they only spent afternoons together like this once a month, and so perhaps he'd forgotten the times when he'd been given his half first.

Except, once noticed, it was difficult to ignore, a quiet corner of Loki's mind keeping track from that day on. Whenever his father brought forth his apple and paring knife, he waited, thought to himself, *perhaps this is the day*, and was disappointed.

(It was also, he realized centuries later, rather interesting that nobody had noticed the frown of an unguarded child. He'd been given a gift; it should have been a smile.)

But he didn't say anything, doing his best to dismiss it. It was easy enough, for a boy barely taller than his mother's waist. It was simply a habit of his father's, simply a side effect of having given them apple halves for years. It didn't mean anything. It was just an apple.

For a time that line of reasoning was enough. For a time it was enough to say it was just a habit. That his father didn't mean anything by it. Loki was different from Thor - that much was obvious and a touch painful for a child who didn't understand much about the world - but that didn't make him *lesser*. His mother said so. And his mother was correct in all (most?) things.

And then, not long after, he realized that he wasn't just given his apple half second, he was also always given the half with the core. Which was a silly thing to care about, all things considered; the half with the core was also ever so slightly larger, which arguably made it the *better* half. Except - it had the core, and extra seeds, and if he wanted the same amount of apple as Thor he had to work a little harder for it.

His frown that day grew deeper, and this time it was noticed.

"Is something wrong?" asked his mother, her own frown mirroring his.

"Ah," said Loki, flashing her a smile. "No, I just thought -" he struggled to find something to fill out the lie - "but it's fine," he finished.

His mother studied him, and Loki felt a sudden flush of shame. He ought not lie to her - she could always tell anyway - but he also couldn't bring himself to say that he was upset over an *apple*. It was a gift; he should have smiled.

He turned from her and bit into his apple half, watching as his father laughingly tried to teach Thor some drill their weapons master had said they weren't yet ready for. Thor had cast aside his half of the apple onto the grass in favour of their father's attention, and Loki couldn't decide which bothered him more: that Thor could so easily throw away something special, or that he cared enough to feel sour over it.

Blessedly his mother said nothing more of it, drawing her husband and other son back to her so that she might continue reading her book aloud. Loki did his best to shove the feeling down and focus on her words. There was no reason to worry over an apple when his father was back to announcing the dialogue of three different warriors within the tale between his mother's narration, each given

some deliberately silly accent or another.

But it nagged at him afterwards, that not only was he without fail given his apple half second, but was also given the core. It shouldn't mean anything - it was only an apple - but he couldn't shake the idea that it did.

At first he continued to try to find justifications. It was a habit. It was happenstance. Surely there were times when he had gone first. He just couldn't think of any. Or perhaps he went first while spending time with his father at other activities - except, he now realized, there were fair few enough of those. Their father was a busy man, a king, and that was why their afternoons together were precious in the first place.

Precious and warm and loving. Precious and warm and loving. Precious and warm and loving, except - except that Loki came second. Precious second, and warm second, and loving second.

He woke one morning on a day when the afternoon would be spent with their father, and for a brief flicker of a moment, he felt just the slightest bit nauseous. He'd been looking forward to the afternoon the same as he always did, except - except - but it was just an apple, it didn't mean anything, and he was probably imagining it besides.

Today, he thought, might be the day that he was given his slice of apple first, or perhaps given the half without the core, and all his anxiety would have been for nothing. One or the other. It didn't have to be both. The core half first, or the good half second. Either would prove him wrong.

Second, and the core, and Loki told himself that it didn't mean anything because it was just an apple.

"Thor," Loki whispered into the darkness of their room in the middle of the night three afternoons later.

Thor didn't respond.

"Thor?" Loki tried again a little louder, staring up at where the light of the moon cast shadows on the canopy of his bed.

Thor hummed, and Loki decided that given the stupidity of the question he was going to ask, half asleep was possibly better than fully awake anyway.

"Have you ever noticed..." Loki trailed off. It was stupid, it was just an apple, it didn't *mean* anything.

"Noticed what?" asked Thor after a long pause. He sounded a little more awake now, more sensitive to the changes in Loki's manner when it was dark and quiet and the world didn't contain more interesting things to capture his attention.

"Noticed which half of the apple father gives you?" Loki asked, phrasing the question in as neutral a manner as he could manage.

"What apple?" asked Thor, and Loki was grateful that his brother couldn't see his cringe in the dark.

"When we..." Loki paused, stared at the canopy, took a breath. "Father always has one for us when he visits," he said. "He had one three days ago."

"Oh," said Thor, his confusion obvious in his voice. "What about it?"

“He slices it in half,” said Loki, divided between annoyance at having to explain the obvious and disgust with himself for caring so deeply about something that Thor didn’t even notice. “And gives us each one side.”

“Of course,” said Thor, his confusion only deepening.

“Do you ever notice which half he gives you?” asked Loki.

“Why would I?” asked Thor.

“Because...” Loki huffed out a sigh of frustration, and he couldn’t quite parse at what it was directed. “Because I always get the half with the core.”

“No,” said Thor, and Loki’s guts twisted. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I do,” insisted Loki.

“Father wouldn’t do that,” countered Thor with absolute certainty.

“But...” Loki hesitated; perhaps Thor was right. Perhaps he was just imagining it. It was a ridiculous thing to believe was happening. Their father must care, or pay attention. Their mother always did. She was always sure to give everything to them in equal measure, and if something had to be uneven, would trade who was given what the next time it happened.

(Which Loki only knew because he paid attention because their father didn’t.)

“And anyway,” continued Thor when it became clear that Loki wasn’t going to continue, “it’s just an apple.”

“I know,” murmured Loki, squeezing his eyes shut. Even the moon through the window left him feeling exposed, like his stupidity would glow if the slightest bit of light touched it. “I know,” he repeated even softer.

“Then sleep,” commanded - well, *suggested* - Thor, “and think no more of it.”

Loki fell silent, but didn’t do either.

To Thor’s credit, he did notice when Loki was yet again given the core-half second. Loki was trying not to glare down at the perfectly nice apple half that was a gift that he shouldn’t resent when Thor caught his eye. His brother’s brow was furrowed; it bothered him that Loki was right, on this day at least. Or maybe it bothered Thor that it bothered Loki.

Either way Thor’s face cleared swiftly, his smile bright as the sun as he leapt forward to Loki.

“I’m not really hungry,” said Thor, pressing the good apple-half into Loki’s hands. “You should have mine, too.”

“But -” began Loki, caught between the unexpected kind gesture and his suddenly redirected resentment.

“It’s the good half,” said Thor with an exaggerated wink, holding Loki’s loose hand against the apple half.

Anger hit Loki in a wave, and then shame at the anger, and then frustration at the shame, and guilt that he’d taken Thor’s apple, and anxiety that their father would know what Thor was doing, and -

“Thank you,” he said, grasping hold of the apple and giving Thor a half-hearted smile.

Thor beamed before launching himself back out into the sunny garden, shouting something at their father about adventures and Frost Giants and presumably - all Thor’s fantasies ended in generally the same way - the killing of some great beast.

“But it’s not the same,” Loki muttered to himself as he watched their father follow Thor out into the garden.

Their father was laughing at Thor, making a half-hearted attempt at cooling his imagined bloodlust. Usually Loki appreciated it when Thor was laughed at, right in the thick of things to imitate their father’s teasing. Instead Loki looked down at the apple halves, one in each hand, and sighed; he didn’t really want either any more, and wanted to join his brother and father out in the garden even less.

He ate the good apple half anyway, if only because their mother was watching.

The next time they spent an afternoon in the garden, Loki took his apple second, glanced at it for just long enough to know that it had the core, and looked to his brother, who hadn’t noticed. *It’s just an apple*, he repeated to himself, and the voice in his head sounded very much like Thor.

He had trouble thinking on much else anyway, nibbling at the edge of his apple-half while their mother read aloud and their father built little maps and cabins on the table with sticks. It had Thor fascinated, focused more on the stick-cabins than the story until their mother gave up on her reading and they all learned a lesson on how to effectively organize the camp of a large hunting party.

Their father, telling tales of wayward hunts in his youth. Their mother, providing commentary on which things they ought not try (which was almost all of it). Thor, enthusiastically prodding for more stories. Loki, eyeing the table and trying to decide whether to ask about the discrepancies between what his father had laid out with sticks and the description of the camps from their mother’s books. Neither, in his opinion, seemed particularly efficient, but perhaps he was missing something.

There came a quieter moment in conversation when Loki opened his mouth in an attempt to ask - it was going to bother him a great deal later if he didn’t - and found his words drowned out by Thor. Their father didn’t notice, responding to Thor with laughter and an imitation of one of the characters in the book. But their mother *did* notice, interrupting Thor and his father so that Loki might ask his question.

Thor seemed annoyed at having the tales interrupted, but their father was perfectly happy to oblige.

“You really ought to know this,” he said to Thor by way of gentle reprimand when he saw his sulking. “How are you supposed to go hunting if you do not know where to pitch your tent?”

“That’s what servants are for,” dismissed Thor.

“When you are old enough, you and your brother might like to go on a hunt with just each other,” suggested their mother.

Thor visibly brightened, and Loki felt a flush of warmth in the way they traded smiles.

And so it was that for a brief half hour, Loki was the holder of their father’s attention above Thor. Every answer begged another question until he asked something that tread too close to adventurous

tales, and then Thor and their father were back to theatrics, and Loki's practical curiosity inadvertently dismissed.

It was still, in Loki's opinion, a good afternoon, even if he did feel a little left out. Even if it did involve nibbling on the worse half of the apple. It was just an apple, and his father had answered all (most) of his questions and, Loki had enjoyed the tales about their father (almost) as much as Thor.

All for his brother had seemed excited to camp alone with him, a month later Thor was beginning to complain about their shared rooms. Something Sif had said, Loki assumed - she'd smirked at him in a particular sort of way while Thor wasn't looking, and though Thor generally kept his complaints to such things as *it's time for us to become our own men* (they weren't even adolescents) and *you keep me awake at night with your reading* (Loki tolerated the miserably stifling heat of burrowing under his furs explicitly to hide his magelights), it was easy enough to read *Sif says I'm a baby for sharing a room with my little brother* between the lines (the difference in their ages was almost exactly the length of a pregnancy, nothing more).

(Decades later it was something of a relief to realize that the tale of his mother's first difficult pregnancy that resulted in a child that was hearty and hale wasn't actually followed immediately by a story of a second, smoother pregnancy that ended with a child that was premature and sickly. Something of a relief. *Something*, anyway.)

But there was nothing that Loki could really say to argue with him without sounding exactly like the whiny baby brother that Thor was claiming he was. It wouldn't, he decided, be entirely terrible to have a suite to himself; to be able to read without interruptions, to sleep with the window open even when Thor might have found it chilly, to never be kept awake when Thor snored.

"I agree," Loki announced the moment that Thor began to complain the next afternoon they spent with their father, the apple core cradled in his hands below the table.

Silence followed as their parents exchanged looks, and Loki felt a twist in his stomach. He didn't really want to have separate rooms, and the look that Thor gave him quenched the spiteful little flame that had been sitting in his chest. But now he was committed, and so he held his expression firm.

"You... what?" asked Thor in the silence that followed.

"I want," said Loki slow and carefully enunciated as he stared directly at Thor, "to be my own man."

Thor's face looked suddenly drawn, and Loki felt a wash of guilt strong enough to distract from the way their father snorted and their mother stifled a laugh. Under the table he played with the stem of the apple core. It was stupid, feeling spiteful over Thor wanting space. It was stupid, the way he already felt lonely. It was stupid, feeling like it all meant something, like Thor wanted to leave him behind, like his only option to prevent being seen as weak was to grasp hold of what Thor wanted and throw it back in his face.

It was just a set of rooms, just the same as it was just an apple.

Their father announced that he would consider it. Their mother said it was, perhaps, time. Thor's drawn expression began to shift towards anger.

"What was that all about?" Thor hissed when they parted from their parents, their father back to work and their mother back to weaving and the two of them back to their now soon to be *un*-shared

rooms.

Loki took two swift steps forward, walking backwards to look at Thor. “You were convincing,” he said as dismissively as he could, shrugging to drive it home.

Thor scowled, and Loki wished that it felt like a victory. Instead it just felt sour, and he twisted back around to walk next to his brother in awkward silence. It lasted all evening and beyond; Thor changed clothes and went to find Sif while Loki stayed in their rooms and read. Knowing that soon he would spend significantly more time alone that way hurt, and Loki was grateful that by noon the next day things seemed to have mended themselves.

No matter what ever else happened between them, finding ways to combat the dreariness of their grammar tutor always brought the brothers back together.

It was several months of (second place apple cores, though he always managed to half convince himself in the space between the afternoons that he was imagining it) planning and organization before their new suites were chosen and largely prepared. Thor and Loki both grew increasingly anxious about the change, their time spent even more together than usual; it reminded Loki of their lives before Thor had become fast friends with Sif, resenting the reminder and revelling in it at turns.

The day that their things were set to permanently move overlapped with a hunting trip their parents had decided to take on short notice. Loki suspected that it was timed on purpose to keep both him and Thor from being constantly under the servant’s feet.

Which mostly only served to place them constantly under the feet of the hunters that accompanied the royal family, Thor playing with the hounds when they were meant to be at rest while Loki haunted the footsteps of the falconers. They’d been on hunting trips before, but never so explicitly to learn - both a blessing and a curse, as instruction on *hunting* was fascinating, but instruction on raising a tent, preparing meals, checking the horses for injuries, and being quizzed on what their father had taught them with sticks on the table months and *months* ago was phenomenally dull.

“You must learn to become your own men,” their mother teased with a smile on the first night when they’d complained about setting up their own tent. “And being your own man requires that you own up to your mistakes.”

They both sulked - they’d spent the entire lesson on setting up the tent shouting insults at each other instead of paying attention - but it was Thor who admitted defeat an hour later and asked for help.

“It’s just a big puzzle,” Loki grumbled with crossed arms as they watched the huntsman take down the tent so that they could try again. “I could have figured it out.”

“And I believe you,” replied Thor. He heaved a deep sigh. “But I would rather sleep sooner than tomorrow midday.”

Loki hummed. Thor had a point, but he didn’t have to *like* it.

As the days passed Thor settled easily into the pattern of the hunt, but Loki continued to haunt the falconers’ steps. They were indulgent of his obsession, though at first they didn’t entirely understand it; it was less that he wanted to be a falconer, and more that he wanted to be a *falcon*, and Loki could *see* the moment that one of the falconers went from indulgent to attentive when Loki talked with authority about the Way Birds Were.

At the falconer's request Loki showed him his magpie skin, fluttering back and forth between their shoulders for the amusement of the adults, chattering at them the entire time. Afterward his father chided him for practicing magic when he was supposed to be learning proper life skills, and didn't listen when Loki tried to explain that he hadn't *just* done it to show off.

"But the falconers *asked* me to," Loki whispered to Thor in the dark of their tent that night, still nauseous from the look on his father's face. "They were telling me about my feathers."

"You can learn that from a book, you know," Thor informed him like Loki didn't know that books could contain knowledge about birds.

"I know," whispered Loki, the nausea twisting. He knew. Knew all the names of the feathers, knew what they looked like in prim, clean illustrations, knew all kinds of technical words and explanations that felt strange and distant from what it was like to *be* a bird.

"Then I don't see what the problem is," Thor replied.

Anger flared in Loki's chest, a thousand nasty words and phrases welling up in his throat only to be swallowed back down.

"It's not the same," he insisted. The falconers had made a deal with him before he'd changed, and there had been something wonderful about having a gentle hand holding onto his wing and explaining exactly what all *his* feathers were for, how *he* might ride the breeze *properly* instead of being limited to gliding around in the palace gardens. Books were only about *theoretical* birds that had learned to fly by instinct as babes rather than making it up already half-grown with an Aesir's justifiable concern about falling nagging at the back of their heads.

"If you say so," said Thor.

Loki sighed and rolled away onto his side, biting back the observation that Thor wouldn't expect to learn how to wield a *weapon* from a *book*. Thor held Loki's skin changing in high esteem, and he wasn't about to risk that by admitting to anything less than perfect skill - it was one of the few places where Thor didn't know enough to criticize.

He woke the next day in low spirits, his father's disapproval and his brother's misunderstanding weighing heavy on his mind. And then the falconers took to calling him Little Magpie, and Loki's heart soared - he was *never* the one who got nicknames, and vowed to savour it (even if he wasn't *little*) while it lasted.

The rest of the trip passed swiftly, each day marked by one happening or another. Loki and Thor together set a snare. Loki deliberately rigged their tent to fall in the middle of the night just to hear Thor's shriek. For a day he had to do the majority of Thor's chores as well as his own. Thor shoved him into a particularly muddy patch of stream as revenge. For a day his brother had to do the majority of Loki's chores as well as his own. Their snare caught a rabbit, and the adults to a one complimented the resultant stew.

If their parent's true purpose had been to distract them both from the moving of their rooms, it was a spectacular success - there had even been an evening when their father had sliced an apple to give them, and Loki didn't remember who had been given what in what order. He could even almost convince himself that he was the one who was given the good half first, the experience had been so wonderful.

The brief period of magic didn't end when they arrived home, their parents taking them to the courtyard their new suites shared and setting them loose to investigate with the intention of having

them practice the rules of formal hospitality by each inviting the rest of their family on a tour. Loki bolted for his rooms the same as Thor did, but unlike Thor behind him, hovered in the doorway looking in at the sitting room. It was *his*, and his alone, and all at once it was exhilarating and horrific and a relief and lonely and -

He stepped in just to quell the growing urge to turn around and accompany Thor into his rooms first. The whole *point* was to be separate (never mind that they'd silently agreed to choose rooms off the same courtyard).

Once past the doorway it was easier to move, and so he sped through the rooms to open every window he could find to let as much of a breeze through as he could manage. Through the windows he could hear his brother shouting to their parents from his rooms, announcing everything he found as though it was surprising that his things were there and that their furniture had been replaced. For his part Loki turned every mirror he could towards the wall, drew a rune with his finger on the ones he couldn't, pulled the quills and ink out of his desk drawers so that he could count to make sure they were all there, checked all the books on his (mostly empty, the possibilities were *endless*) bookcases, and finished by collapsing onto the furs of his new, adult sized bed to stare up at the unfamiliar canopy.

Green. The canopy and curtains, the majority of the rugs, the most common colour in the tapestries, all green. They'd made altogether too many things in his rooms green, and he *loved* it. His mother had probably given instructions to the servants doing the moving; he'd said some vague quiet thing about his preferred colours, but hadn't expected it to be taken *quite* so seriously.

Maybe later it would be embarrassing. For now it just made it all feel like home, like *his*, even if he *was* going to miss Thor (all the way across the courtyard, an entire forty paces away).

Their parents gave them a full half hour to explore, calling them back out to the courtyard to decide who was going to do their tour first. Loki did his level best not to look at Thor, knowing that his brother would want him to go first - one of them had once looked their mother in the face and said that hospitality rules were for girls, and it *hadn't* been Loki.

Except that Loki could feel Thor's eyes on him, and it was a matter of moments before Loki glanced to the side. Thor really was doing his best to look pitiful, and the worst part was that it *worked*.

Loki's tour of his rooms went smoothly, as did Thor's, though for *whatever reason*, the things Thor said sounded *remarkably* derivative.

"I'm not helping you when you bring Sif around," said Loki with his arms crossed once their parents were out of earshot.

"That's fine," said Thor, the grin he flashed him bright and shallow. "She doesn't know anything about hospitality either."

Loki sighed and rolled his eyes. "Sif is a terrible girl," he muttered, collapsing onto the bench beneath the ash tree in the centre of the courtyard.

"You'd have the right of it," said Thor in thoughtless sharp defense of his friend, "since..."

Go on, shrieked Loki's thoughts even as he glared at his brother to shut him up. *Say it! Just get it over with, admit you feel just the same as everybody else, even father thinks that I'm -*

Whatever Thor said next was lost to Loki, his eyes fixed on the flagstones below his feet as he

swallowed. The only evidence he had that their father thought... thought all the same things as everyone else was that he kept telling him not to use magic or shift skins where other people could see, and gave him the worse half of an apple second. The first was - was *reasonable* - and Loki wasn't even sure the second was *real*.

"They shelved my books wrong," said Loki as he jolted to his feet. (They hadn't. His books were in the exact order they had been before, and he ought to find which servant that was and thank them.) "I need to fix it."

"See?" said Thor, keeping pace with Loki across the courtyard. "This is exactly what I -"

Apparently neither a glare nor an excuse was enough to make Thor go away, and so Loki whirled on his brother and threw a punch.

For the most part the fight went exactly how Loki would have predicted if someone had asked him before he'd started it: Thor ducked, Loki caught himself, Thor grappled with Loki's clothes, Loki threw Thor to the ground knowing full well that's where they would both end up if he did so, and after a brief tussle on the flagstones Thor won.

Outside of the fact that Loki had gotten in the habit of drawing either his formal dagger (still sharp) or his work knife (*really* sharp) in any fight that happened outside the training ring.

"What is *wrong* with you?" snarled Thor as he both shied away from the blade of Loki's dagger and did his best to pin him down.

Loki went limp, staring up at his brother from flat on his back, his hands both falling to the ground to admit defeat.

"I don't know," he said, his voice weak.

It was just - it didn't *mean* anything, that he always came second. He hadn't thought much of it on the hunt but - even then - but he hadn't thought about it which meant - and he wasn't even sure that he *did* always come second - their father wouldn't *do* that - (Wouldn't he? Didn't he?) - Thor said he wouldn't, which had to mean - except of course Thor wouldn't notice, he was the one who - and how could he be *wrong*, he was *obsessed* with it -

"That's a stupid answer," snapped Thor after a long, confused pause.

"Yes," agreed Loki, his head spinning from the combination of the fall and one of Thor's punches and the whirling thoughts inside his head.

For a long moment they stared at one another, both unsure, both confused. In many of their conflicts this was where one or the other (but usually Thor) would suggest something entirely unrelated. That they might go steal something from the kitchen, or find a guard who was slacking and teach him a lesson, or beg one of the horse masters to accompany them on a ride -

"Books," said Loki just as Thor opened his mouth. All he would think about would be their father. And coming second. And - it hurt, it hurt, Thor hurt - resenting Thor for not knowing or caring or seeing that he came first.

There was another pause, another thing that hurt. He could see Thor's indecision, hated the way he hesitated; his brother glanced at the dagger, and pushed himself off Loki. The dagger, however instinctual, had very decidedly been a *mistake*.

"Sorry," said Thor as he stood - he didn't offer to help Loki up. "For... saying what I did."

"We're even," said Loki as though he had any idea what Thor had said. He gestured at the knife still held loosely in one hand. "That was..."

"Unexpected," offered Thor in lieu of saying *dishonourable*.

"Yes," agreed Loki, glancing away so that he didn't have to see Thor's frown. Maybe, possibly, Thor should know about the things the other noble boys said and did when he was out of sight.

He sheathed his dagger, and didn't say anything.

Parting to go to different rooms was strange, but Loki found it hard to consider it unwelcome. He was used to having to hide from Thor if he wanted time alone, and if Thor was motivated Loki could still usually be found. The only place with a lock to keep Thor out had been their washroom.

In his own rooms Loki had a lock on the first door, and a lock on his bedroom, and a lock on the washroom. Three full layers of protection from the outside world, sitting on the floor with his back against the tub to read a book. Ridiculous. Safe, but mostly ridiculous.

That night was surreal and uncomfortable, going through the motions of bed entirely alone, crawling into bed entirely alone, waving off the light entirely alone. For the first time in something like a year, Thor across the courtyard was going to have to rid the room of light himself instead of letting Loki do it from afar. He might have to ask Thor if he'd remembered to move his candle to the bedside, or if he'd had to walk through his bedroom in the dark.

Loki hardly slept, and though he tried to tell himself it was because sleeping somewhere without Thor rolling around nearby was unfamiliar, it was impossible to deny that it was mostly because he still trying to sort out his father, trying to remember what happened with the apple he'd been given on the hunt as though if he'd gone first it might free him of his obsession. It was a missing piece of knowledge, a moment when he might have gone first, or it might have been the half without the core, and he might not even have *realized* that he was holding proof that his father didn't favour Thor. (He tried to convince himself that he had vague memories of him being first. It didn't work.)

In the light of morning with a cool breeze drifting across his cheek as the sun rose, he decided that he was being stupid, and that his father must surely think the best of him, and if the best of what Loki mostly was (in all the things that mattered: the training of a warrior, the right kind of humour for a man, the value of his honour) was *adequate*, it would have to be enough.

The firmness of his conviction lasted a week, when their father handed Thor the right rabbit's foot from their snared catch from the hunt, and Loki the left, second. It wasn't just the apple - but this, too, must not mean anything, must just be a habit that transferred from the apple - and the left foot of a rabbit was much the same as the right foot, there was nothing *defective* about it. There wasn't even any silly old wives tales about the left foot being less lucky (which he chose not to look up in the library to check).

Afterwards he asked for a thin gold chain to attach the rabbit's foot to, began to use the chain as a bookmark with the idea that the rabbit's foot would keep him from losing his page, and promptly stopped reading the book. He left it abandoned on the side table in his - office felt silly, but that's what it was - office, tucked carefully beneath some parchment in the furthest back corner where he couldn't see it.

Thor wore his hanging from his belt next to his dagger.

An afternoon came and passed with their father. Loki took an apple core into his hands second. His thanks were small, though still sincere. It was a gift. Most people didn't get gifts from kings. It was

really a thing to be grateful for. (The king was his father. Fathers gave sons gifts. Thanks was appropriate. Being grateful for something as petty as plain acknowledgement of his existence was the state of a peasant.) He hardly heard his mother's words as she read from her book aloud. He tried not to feel resentment when his father voiced the warriors, and did his best to pretend he hadn't seen his mother's frown.

Three days later he was sitting in his mother's weaving room with a book open in his lap, staring at the words and trying to think of exactly how to phrase his question. He wanted an answer, but he didn't want to admit to his real concerns - and yet no matter how he tried, he was still admitting to some kind of weakness.

"Mother," he said without looking up when he'd decided that there was no good way to phrase it, "do people think I'm worth less than Thor?"

The *clack clack clack* of his mother's weaving stilled, and Loki turned his eyes to the wall. He knew *exactly* what people thought of him on account of having spelled every reflective surface he could find in the palace that wasn't warded to be a spyglass. ("For the purposes of mischief," he'd told Thor when he recruited his help in the finding of mirrors and metal and glass. And they were, as a second use.)

In the training ring he was inferior. Outside the training ring he fought like a petty criminal. Tutors said he was intelligent and disciplined but unfocused. Women thought his mother was wasting her time teaching a *boy* shallow tricks with seidr. Guards and warriors whispered about what the seidr was going to do to him come adolescence. When he wasn't with Thor he was dour, and when he was he dragged his brother down. *A little bit strange*, the kindest people would say. *A little bit strange, and a little bit stranger by the day.*

"Some do," his mother admitted. "But they are wrong to do so."

Loki studied her from the corner of his eye, and she studied him right back. It was an honest answer, and Loki was left wondering if she watched through the mirrors the same as he did, if she'd seen servants chasing him up and down the halls in an effort to stop him from leaving fingerprints on every reflective surface he came across. He'd gotten the idea from something she'd mentioned off hand, after all.

"But I doubt that is what you are truly asking," she observed.

Loki fought fiercely with himself for exactly ten seconds before blurting out "why does father give everything to Thor first?"

His mother looked stricken, and if he wasn't so desperate for an answer, Loki would have felt full to the brim with guilt. As it was all he could do was watch her and wait, trying desperately not to give in to pleading for an answer.

"Your father," she said after a long pause to think, her words slow and measured, "does not consider you lesser."

(Not the first lie she'd ever told him, but as an adult watching her from the other side of the All-Father's sickbed, he knew it was the first one that mattered. *Your father does everything for a reason* indeed.)

"Then why does he -"

"You and your brother carry different strengths," she interrupted, and Loki bit back the rest of his

words - she wasn't like his father, she wouldn't snap at him for disagreeing, but her disappointment was all the worse for it. "And if your father treats you differently for it, it is only to protect you from a world that does not understand your value."

Loki squirmed as she studied him, swallowing down the urge to shout *but what does that have to do with Thor going first?*

She stood away from her weaving, coming to sit next to him on his lounge and pulling him close to her side. He let her do so, but kept an eye on the door; it wouldn't do much for his reputation to be caught snuggled next to his mother. She caught his chin to gently redirect his gaze to her; most likely she meant for him to see her smile and feel reassured, but mostly he just felt vulnerable.

"Your father loves you," his mother said. "And would never hurt you deliberately."

"I know," said Loki, moving his head away from her hand to once again glance at the door. His fingers itched to lock it from a distance, but if his mother had it unlocked it was for a reason - he wouldn't have been able to visit her at all if she hadn't - and so instead he pulled away.

He knew she was upset because of the way she sighed, but he didn't look at her - if he didn't see it, it didn't count. Instead he curled on the other end of the lounge, opening his book so that he could pretend to read for the rest of the afternoon. Even at a distance she was comforting, and that would have to do.

The next afternoon they spent with their father in their mother's garden was - it was - *his father gave him the good half of the apple first*, and for all of a moment Loki felt that maybe, *possibly*, everything was going to be alright.

He smiled and thanked their father and looked to Thor and was confused but not upset that his brother hadn't seemed to notice and glanced at his mother and all the enthusiasm drained out of him as he caught sight of her soft smile. He turned to look at their father and found that he was already deep in conversation with Thor about something the two of them might do with Sif and General Tyr. There was one reason and one reason only that Loki had been given the good half of the apple first, and it was that their mother had *told* their father to do it.

Tears pricked at his eyes - it wasn't the *same*, it didn't *count*, how could his mother be so *stupid* - and he set the apple half on the table, kept his face turned away from his mother, and swallowed down his tears. Now wasn't the time.

And there never would be, because it was an *apple*. He was being driven mad by an *apple*.

He took a deep, steadying breath, briefly drummed his fingers on the edge of the table, and once again took up the apple. He could hardly taste it, fighting to keep it down, but it gave him an excuse to politely listen to a conversation that he could hardly hear instead of trying to convince himself that he wanted to have anything to do with Sif or General Tyr in any circumstances *ever*.

"It isn't the same," he muttered to himself two hours later, arms wrapped around his knees and his face hidden, sitting on the washroom floor with three locked doors between him and Thor practising forms in the courtyard. "It's not the same."

There were no tears, and the next time they spent an afternoon with their father, Loki smiled like everything was just *fine*.

Because it was.

Because it was *just an apple*.

And if it was just an apple and simultaneously wasn't fine then he was *insane*.

For months he managed to believe his own lie. Smiling for second best got easier. His mother didn't make his father give Loki the better apple half first, and so it didn't happen again. He tried not to care that it didn't happen, and tried not to care that his mother hadn't pushed. Always took his apple half without hesitation, but slowly, slowly, stopped eating it.

And then, for the first time in several years, he was sick.

The worst kind of sick, the kind of sick where he didn't feel sick at all, stuck alone except for visits from his mother and Eir and, on several occasions when he was very young, his father. They wouldn't even let him see *Thor*, he was so sick, even if he didn't feel it. At least this time he could spend his time in his new rooms.

(*It was the glamour*, he thought to himself as he fell and watched the bottom of Asgard's disc fade from sight. *They were still perfecting the glamour*. His lungs formed laughter despite the lack of air. *You were never sick. You were the illness*.)

For a full week Loki sulked about alone in his rooms, stuck reading and sleeping and trying to hold conversations with Thor through the shutters. It was *miserable* - but, he realized three days in, it also fell right on top of the afternoon he was supposed to spend with their father. He knew that he ought to be disappointed that his father didn't come visit him in his rooms to make up for it; instead he mostly felt guilty over his *relief*. Nobody expected him to smile while he was sick.

Afterwards life resumed as though nothing had happened. It never took long to catch up to Thor in their lessons. There were few enough people who wouldn't accept *I'm fine* as his response when they asked after his illness. Thor welcomed him back with enthusiasm, and moments later they were whispering all the things they hadn't wanted to shout through the shutters.

Except then his father sought him out, and whether it had anything to do with his illness Loki didn't know and didn't care.

"It is time you had your own horse," his father told him, a hand already on his back to steer him towards the stables. "And though you shall pick him from among the colts, it is a father's responsibility to make sure his son has all the information he needs."

"What about Thor?" asked Loki, everything in his chest warm from the affection of his father's hand.

His father laughed. "It is to be your horse, Loki, and I hardly think you want to make decisions based on his advice besides."

Loki stifled his startled laugh, and for a full afternoon he basked in his father's exclusive attention. They watched the horsemaster parade the best colts. His father laughed at a joke he made with a loud, warm rumble. Loki rode three, and picked one with black around its hooves and nose and brown everywhere else. They named him, to the horsemaster's horror, Ulf.

Afterwards Loki hesitated by the stable that housed the ponies he and Thor had learned to ride on, and his father, against all odds, nudged him inside to say goodbye.

Maybe - just maybe - his father didn't mind that he was occasionally just a *little* girlish.

For the rest of the day Loki glowed. There was no way his mother could have organized any of *that*.

Right up until Thor suggested that the next day the two of them could take their new steeds out for his first ride together.

"My first ride," Loki observed as his heart began to sink.

"Well," said Thor as though it was the most obvious thing in the world, "yes."

"Because you and father..." Loki took a breath as all his happiness flashed into fury flashed into misery. "Already went for a ride."

"You were sick," said Thor with a shrug.

"Ah," said Loki, eyes averted.

Again. *Again.*

"The three of us were supposed to go together," continued Thor. He hesitated; apparently Loki's expression made his emotions clear. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"I was sick," agreed Loki, echoing Thor's shrug.

He hadn't *felt* sick. He could have gone for a ride just fine, he was *sure* of it.

Which was neither here nor there, because Thor was still looking at him with increasing trepidation, and so Loki summoned a smile and agreed that they would go together the next day. He didn't assume their father would join them - he was busy, he'd said as much off hand while helping Loki pick out his colt - but when he didn't, it still hurt.

The next month came and passed, their afternoon with their father swiftly approached, and then arrived. If Loki hadn't so recently been confined to his rooms because of an illness he didn't feel, he might have pretended his nausea was real instead of just from dread. As it was, he took a book with him, choosing something relevant to their lessons so that he would have an excuse to be reading it while they were meant to be visiting.

When his father offered him his apple core after giving Thor the good half, Loki stared at it for long enough to make the silence awkward. It *wasn't* just an apple - it was a horse and a rabbit's foot and a ride his father didn't join and a lack of visit while he was ill. It was - it was *everything*, every little thing, and -

"I think," said Loki before he could stop himself, "that I don't really like apples."

The silence only deepened, the awkwardness accompanied by something like - not *anger*, but disappointment.

"Thank you," murmured Loki, eyes cast down to his book once more.

What followed wasn't strictly an argument, but it *was* even more awkward than the silence. A collection of completely reasonable questions at his unexpected pronouncement. His father had thought he liked apples. Yes, well, he was wrong. Why hadn't he said anything? Because the apple half was a gift, and - it was a spiteful thing to say, an inappropriate thing to say, and the politely spoken lie fell out of him in a miserable sideways false triumph anyway - he didn't want his father to feel bad.

It was miserable, it was utterly miserable... and yet, all three of the other members of his family had looked at him and what he'd said had *mattered*.

He carried the ugly little triumph cradled in his heart for the rest of the month until the next afternoon with their father. It was a relief, knowing that he wouldn't have to be given the worse half of the apple and pretend to like it. It was a relief, knowing that the saga was over, even if he came second at other times in other places, it wouldn't be so biting, so constant, and -

Loki watched in slow dawning horror from behind his book as Thor was given the *entire* apple.

Of course. Of *course*. Why he hadn't seen that coming he didn't know. Why *shouldn't* his father give Thor the entire apple? Since Loki didn't want his half, and Thor thought apples were just fine? Why did it *hurt* to watch Thor take three bites before abandoning the apple on the table? It was just an *apple*.

For the rest of the afternoon he quietly seethed. He couldn't even say who, exactly, he was angry with. If it was Thor, for not noticing and wasting what he'd been given. If it was his father, for not going out of his way to find out what Loki *did* like. If it was his mother, who hadn't properly answered the question he'd actually cared about. Or if it was just and only himself, a stupid child possessed by a madness that meant he couldn't stop caring about an *apple*.

It happened again the month after that, and again the month after that, and slowly, for the sake of keeping himself from hating Thor for the crime of *eating an apple*, Loki began to find excuses to stay away.

At first he was cajoled by his mother and harassed by his brother. Then they changed to asking him in gently unhappy tones whether or not he would be joining them without his needing an excuse. And then, finally, he was told when they would be in his mother's garden, and he could go or not as he pleased without needing a reason.

Which should have been a relief - but it wasn't. The longer Loki stayed away, the more he second guessed himself, the more he argued with himself. It was only an apple. It was only a habit. It wasn't meant to hurt. It was only an apple. He wasn't even sure if he was right, that he'd always gotten the core half second. The more time went on the less sharp it felt. The fewer instances he could remember. The more he questioned whether he was even right, the more he thought that perhaps - perhaps he was exaggerating - or perhaps even imagining it -

And even if he wasn't, it was only an *apple*.

Except...

End Notes

How many people have titled their fic "Imagined Slight"? Many. So many. Did I do it anyway? Yes. Yes I did.

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